

INTRODUCTION

The first two poems I composed as an adult were most likely written in the spring of 1963, at the end of my senior year at Yale. In hindsight, both seem emblematic of the liberal arts education I gained from that august institution.

The first, "*Culpa eterna*," embodies all that I had assimilated not just from four years of upper-level honors Spanish literature courses — that magical, musical quality inherent in the Romance languages, its heightened lyricism achieved through the sensuous orchestration of vowel sounds — but from five earlier years of Spanish and Latin language and literature courses, which I had taken while attending a college-preparatory school in St. Louis. The second poem, "Walls of Tragedy," serves almost as a microcosm of the somewhat limited tour of classical and American literature I had taken at Yale: the *Oedipus* cycle, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Waste Land*, *The Great Gatsby*, *On the Road*, and, through the poem's epigraph, *Moby Dick*.

Ironically, where the first poem evidences a certain degree of mastery of Spanish and use of its conventions, the second one, written in English, is freighted with Latinate inversions of sentence structure, forced end rhymes, broken meters, awkward metaphors, and an overriding somnolence fused with a pious tone the poem just cannot support. Quite simply, I had become more fluent, and certainly more literarily well grounded and confident, in my foreign language of choice than in my mother tongue. Whereas my classmates majoring in English literature had thoroughly familiarized themselves with Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, the metaphysical poets and dramatists, and other important authors up the line, I had mastered their Spanish counterparts: Fray Luis de León, Calderón de la Barca, San Juan de la Cruz, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, and many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century, as well as contemporary, Spanish and Latin American fictionists, playwrights, essayists, and poets. Occasionally, my Yale friends would inquire about my postgraduation goals, what I was intending to do with my formidable knowledge of Spanish literature and my broad smattering of the humanities, the liberal arts that had intoxicated me for four years of enthusiastic learning. I had no answers.

The third poem in this volume, "The Marvelous Color Black," may give added insight into the dilemma I was creating for myself as I, perhaps like Oedipus, groped blindly toward some clearer understanding of my undisclosed destiny. I can still recall sitting at my father's desk in his downtown St. Louis office in August of 1963, less than a month before my enrollment in Washington University to begin a dual course of graduate study in business and English — my calculated attempt to satisfy two quite disparate compulsions: the first, to acquiesce to what I believed to be my father's desire for me to follow in his footsteps, enter the mercantilistic life, become a responsible businessman, and reap the rewards of a successful career as a manufacturer of men's clothing; the second, by becoming a professional writer or teacher, to fulfill my obligation to myself not to squander all my precious, hard-won education. "The Marvelous Color Black" manifested itself to me like a genie materializing from a bottle of imagination I had unstoppied in a moment of boredom and daydreaming that afternoon at my father's office, when I should have been concentrating on some facet of the business instead of lamenting

being cooped up indoors on a warm summer day. The poem came spontaneously, an astonishing windfall by way of free association, an activity in which I had not previously engaged. In essence, in the time it took me to capture that illusive, fleeting cluster of images and set them down on Biltwell Company letterheads I kept pulling from my father's desk drawer as the poem unfolded, it dictated itself to me and demanded that I slap it on the pages in highly unconventional placements, giving it an unusual appearance, which even then I felt somehow added to the sense of urgency I was attempting to convey. I recognized that something wonderful was happening to me. Exultantly, I was unloosing a voice I could tell was my own, embellishing a theme that was relevant and poignant to me: the clarion call to stop intolerance, prejudice, and bigotry in their tracks, deal them a deathblow. Of course, this was not only the era of escalating offensives in Vietnam but, perhaps more importantly, the rise of national awareness of the need to redress America's shabby civil-rights record, a radical plea for which was being voiced ever more stridently, though, paradoxically, through the Gandhian tactics of passive resistance, by Martin Luther King, Jr. This poem, then, was my own reproach against racism.

Soon, I would be in school again, taking three graduate courses in business and two in English. This decision was only partly motivated by my indecisiveness regarding a profession. Realistically, I knew that I could remain "exempt," as the expression of the day had it, if I was enrolled in graduate school. And although the war in Southeast Asia continued to be waged with ever increasing virulence and resolve on the part of America's messianic visionaries, my own limited clairvoyance extended no further than protecting myself, keeping out of harm's way. After all, if I was to do something noble, worthwhile, with my life, be it by making a contribution to pedagogy, scholarship, or creative writing, I would not only have to hone my skills, continue to add to my intellectual storehouses by pursuing my studies and my writing with diligence and a sense of their importance, but I would have to *stay alive*. And fighting a war that I and my friends had tenaciously protested against on the grounds that it was patently inhumane and ethically, morally, philosophically, and spiritually absurd, even undemocratic, was not going to achieve the hoped-for results for the nation or for me.

Having finished my first semester in graduate school, it became abundantly clear to me that I had extended myself as far as I could in my business studies, considering my limited background in mathematics, economics, accounting, and statistics. Mine was not a numerically oriented mind but rather one more closely attuned to deriving answers and making judgments through implication, by inference; it took comfort in inconclusive, open-ended closures as opposed to clear-cut solutions. There was something literarily, poetically satisfying to me about seeing the world imaginatively rather than empirically. In short, business school and I had to part ways in order for me to avoid facing imminent scholastic failure as well as possible induction into the armed forces. However, by the time the Selective Service mandated that to remain exempt, one had to be not just in graduate school *and* married but *also* a parent, I was twenty-five,

unwed, had no inclinations in that direction, and was eagerly getting older and older, though never quite fast enough to say for certain that my 2-S status was impregnable.

The result was that for what became four years of relative freedom from parental censure and the responsibilities of providing food and shelter for myself, I lived in a womb, a refuge that nurtured untainted, pristine learning in an absolute vacuum. My job, my only job, really, was to educate myself, let my intellectual appetites surfeit themselves on some of the finest instruction available in any American university, right there in St. Louis, where I could live with my parents and devote myself to my studies and my creative writing.

All this is not to say, however, that there weren't tensions inherent in this lifestyle nor that I didn't suffer stress from so much independence. Mine was a conflictive life despite its lack of accountability to the powers that be in the "real world." If Vietnam was becoming less of a personal threat, other issues were growing more problematic: Having abandoned my intentions of earning an MBA, would I ever be able to work for my father with a master's degree in English? Had I disappointed him? Had I closed myself out of the preparation requisite to making a livelihood in the world beyond Academe? Did this mean that I had to become a teacher?

This last concern was a knotty one for me because the more I advanced through the ranks toward my degree in English literature, the more I began to disrespect many of my instructors, whom I saw as "hangers-on," even as they condescendingly denigrated others' ambitions, vocations, and accomplishments with impunity. It seemed to me that too many of my professors and teaching assistants were unwitting victims of the same cynicism and narrow-mindedness they accused those outside the rarefied precincts of the Land of Arts and Sciences of possessing.

And these negative and, by turns, misanthropic aspects of university life disturbed me deeply because I felt myself, semester by semester, being drawn into that vortex of arrogant intolerance and intellectual hubris, becoming, like Diogenes, perhaps, a cynic, carrying around in broad daylight a lamp, or welding torch, announcing to the world in my writing as well as in daily polemics with my fellow students that I was "in search of a human being." Little did I know then that that human being was me. Anxiously though, I had begun to suspect that, paradoxically, as my academic knowledge expanded, my good old-fashioned common sense, which I knew I really needed to survive, was rapidly diminishing.

Another struggle I experienced, ancillary yet grown from the same seed, was frustration over whether I should emphasize my scholarly talents or give vent to my creative instincts. Of course, I was writing papers for my classes; they consisted of analytical critiques of short stories, novels, and poems that I was absorbing daily, assignments essential in maintaining a grade point average that would enhance my résumé were I to choose teaching as my career. But I was also leading a double life, that of imaginary professional writer, deriving my living from having my novels, stories, and poems published in prestigious journals and by New York presses.

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This strain was heightened by my ambivalent, double-edged suspicion that, on the one hand, I was in the wrong place, with the constraints of school holding me back from devoting my full energies to writing poems and novels, but that, on the other hand, school was having a very salutary effect: it was a marketplace for the infusion of new ideas and voices that were fueling my desire to be a writer and, simultaneously, reminding me daily that it was my responsibility to speak out about contemporary as well as traditional concerns affecting mankind.

Inextricable from this same matrix of doubts was the seemingly irreconcilable question of whether I should concentrate on prose or poetry full time. My first literary hero, William Faulkner, who to this day resonates in my writing, though only in muted strains, actually dissuaded me from becoming a fictionist, despite initially encouraging me by the example of his poetic prose, because finally his influence was so all-encompassing as to be annihilating. Between 1963 and 1967, I wrote three novels and a novella. Not coincidentally, each of my books resounded with lyrical cadences and convoluted, half-page and page-long Faulknerian sentences patched together with dubious grammar and mechanics. All my prose relied on “polysyllabic pyrotechnics” I was not really capable of carrying off. And even if I had been competent, I realized that after a certain period of studied and/or unconscious emulation of an author or authors, every fledgling writer, certainly I, must invent his own identifiable voice or risk being called an imitator. I knew that foisting on the world even one more approximation of *The Sound and the Fury* would be an exercise in futility for me, a death knell; it would not advance my own unique presence.

The poems I composed during this writing “apprenticeship,” which developed concurrently with my graduate education, became more numerous and ambitious as I developed the confidence to express myself less and less through the voices of those I most admired. Nonetheless, the reader of these early poems — prose narratives with poetry, prose poems, free-verse and stream-of-consciousness poems — will readily detect the influences I have previously mentioned: Spanish and Latin American authors, whom I assimilated at Yale, as well as Faulkner and the English writers, whom I didn’t fully integrate into my poetry until my graduate years. In retrospect, those whose writing most affected me were Johnson, Donne, Browne, Swift, Carlyle, and Wordsworth; Melville, Poe, Hawthorne, Dreiser, Lewis, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway; Rimbaud, Trakl, Eliot, Frost, Shapiro, Roethke, and Ferlinghetti. However, my greatest indebtedness was, and is, to Milton, Kafka, and Faulkner.

One other preoccupation of mine during my graduate days resulted from trying to nurture some sort of social life while at the same time pursuing a writer’s life of self-imposed reclusiveness. Early on, it became obvious that when I was committing myself to writing, I was, of necessity, removing myself from participation in other experiences. Like all writers, I had to suffer extended bouts of isolation, which often led to a sense of loneliness, depression, and, occasionally, even desperation and self-immolation. I saw that as active a pursuit as writing seems, it has a paradoxical concomitant: passivity. I could conjure up and portray extravagant, absurd events and people, even vicariously share their lives, but as the person manipulating the twists and tangles of narration and characterization,

I had to remain behind the scenes. I knew that once I completed the story or poem, the life created belonged to the characters, to the medium itself; I, as the writer, at best retained copyright, usually nothing more than the memory of having willed the composition into existence. Worse, I realized I might end up with nothing to show for all my labor except silence and anonymity and the empty sensation of having accumulated an overabundance of unlocked time.

At some point, I began to question what I intended to gain from writing: What was its fundamental purpose, and what was mine? Could I earn a living from my writing? Would it still provide me with enough satisfaction if I never received the attention I now began to dream my creative works would one day garner? And perhaps most essentially, could I have a social life and still sustain the concentration and ferocious competitive edge successful writing demands of its practitioners?

Indeed, as many of the poems in this volume suggest, I did attempt to reconcile this last dilemma during two aborted relationships and in the initiation of my one true romance, with Jan. However, a close reading of the poems in this volume will suggest that even this latter experience, though healthier than the first two, was of the same idealistic nature. In hindsight, I can honestly admit that in expressing my love, I behaved much like the bumbling, self-deluded Alonso Quijano, who fancied himself Don Quixote, that magnificently preposterous hero-at-large, protecting, rescuing, and avenging his imaginary, beloved “maiden in distress,” Dulcinea, or like James Gatz, platonically transforming a mundane Daisy Buchanan, through his outsized Gatsby imagination, into the beguiling East Egg socialite of his most extravagant, green-blinking fantasies.

Doubtless, at that time my immaturity was consonant with my highly romanticized attitudes toward what constituted my life’s mission. Through the power of my imagination, I was going to save the world, everyone in it, including myself (maybe even its most deadbeat professors and pious warmongers), from misfortune and unhappiness. Surely, even then, I must have assessed myself predominantly as a naive dreamer, a young man who somehow had managed to propel himself beyond a point of no return in a pursuit that might never offer any hope of reconciling the tensions that had beleaguered him for the four years he had borrowed against his future.

Regardless, without design, he, I, had begun leaving behind, in the form of a semiautobiographical poetic chronicle, a lyrical free-verse book of hours, a tangible record of my travail and my ecstasy, my certitude and my confusion, my journey into the heart of that person, a poet, whom I would one day realize — as I now do, thirty-two years later, on writing this introduction to the first volume of my *Complete Poems* — I would never stop becoming.

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